



Top to bottom, left to right:
1) Astronauts John Blaha, left, and Shannon Lucid, right, and Cosmonaut Vasily Tsibiliev take a break from a Soyuz survival training exercise at the Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Center in Star City, Russia. Blaha will replace Lucid on board Mir next week, and Tsibiliev is scheduled to command the Mir-23 mission.
2) Blaha joins Russians Pavel Vinogradov and Gennadiy Manakov and French cosmonaut researcher Claudie Andre-Deshays during an indoor training session. Blaha, Vinogradov, Manakov and Andre-Deshays trained to work together on Mir, but a shuttle launch delay and medical problem for Manakov preempted their time together on orbit.
3) Water from the Black Sea glistens in the hair of Lucid and Blaha after a water survival training session.
4) Blaha is helped with his life jacket during the Black Sea exercise.
5) Blaha goes over checklists with Mir-23 Commander Tsibiliev and Flight Engineer Alexander Lazutkin during training in Star City.



‘There’s no better way to contribute to the International Space Station...’

—Astronaut John Blaha

‘Ever’ Ready

Veteran Astronaut John Blaha hopes four-month stay on Mir will define ‘forever’ on-orbit

By Kyle Herring

Five years ago John Blaha spent a little time in Germany. It was there that he first thought of living on a space station—Russia’s Mir Space Station. Next week, he will climb aboard the space shuttle to begin his fifth mission and a four-month stay on Mir.

Blaha met several cosmonauts and greeted some astronaut friends while in Berlin for a conference of the Association of Space Explorers in October 1991. And though the focus of the meeting was not joining U.S. and Russian space efforts toward one common goal, the subject of using America’s shuttle and Russia’s space station was discussed.

“I remember returning from that conference and thinking to myself, ‘we ought to be doing that right now,’” Blaha said. “From my perspective I started thinking that if I’m ever going to fly on a space station, I’m going to have to fly on the one that’s really up there and not the one that we’re getting ready to build.”

The other more important reason he is flying to Mir, Blaha said, is to gain first-hand experience that he can use to better assist in preparing future International Space Station crew members and managers on the ground.

“To me, flying on a real space station and understanding it from a real operational viewpoint would help me contribute to the space station that we’re getting ready to build and operate for the next 10 to 15 years,” he said.

Atlantis is set to launch Sept. 16 for a rendezvous and docking with Mir for the fourth time. Blaha will fly up with STS-79 Commander Bill Readdy, Pilot Terry Wilcutt and Mission Specialists Jay Apt, Carl Walz and Tom Akers. *Atlantis*’ crew will come home with Cosmonaut Researcher Shannon Lucid who has been living and conducting experiments on the orbiting complex since March.

Following docking, Blaha, a retired Air Force Colonel, will be reunited with Lucid with whom he trained at the Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Center at Star City outside Moscow for the past year and a half. The two will fly in space together for the third time, having flown on two previous shuttle flights — STS-43 in August 1991 and STS-58 in October 1993.

It will be the first astronaut-for-astronaut crew exchange on Mir to continue the permanent U.S. presence in space.

Close friends, in addition to co-workers, Blaha and Lucid headed to California in 1994 for intense Russian language training and then traveled to Star City in January 1995. Joining Blaha in an apartment at the training complex was his wife, Brenda.

Though the move to Russia was a bit of a culture shock, the Blahs knew what to expect and adapted quickly to life outside Moscow.

“John and I had been here the summer before we came for two weeks and so I knew what it was going to be like before I arrived,” Brenda said. Though there was no such thing as a typical day in Star City, she said she adapted to a lifestyle that included language training twice a week and once a week trips to the American Embassy in

Moscow to do some shopping. On the weekends, she and John would go to the theater, shop and go out to dinner.

“Sometimes I have tea with my Russian friend upstairs and sometimes I go shopping with the German cosmonaut’s wife,” she said, in addition to visiting with the other American wives. The Blahs were visited last Christmas by two of their three children for two weeks.

Blaha describes the American and Russian training techniques as “completely different, but yet the results are equal.” While NASA uses simulator training and repetition to train space flyers, the Russian system, “which has not changed since Yuri Gagarin flew the first space flight,” Blaha said, relies on lectures, classroom training and oral and written tests.

“A completely different philosophy and training system than we have, but again, both are very successful,” he said.

It’s important, Blaha said, for both countries to recognize each other’s traditions when it comes to mission preparations. “Both programs have been successful with very different approaches. Everybody who works on the shuttle/Mir program, followed by the International Space Station program, should recognize those differences from the start and not hide the fact that we are miles apart.”

“If you’re aware of that you understand why there are so many differences as we try to talk with each other to work out the problems in a common shuttle/Mir program or on an ISS program.”

With training complete, all that remains is the mission for the 54-year-old Blaha. He will join Mir-22 Commander Valery Korzun and Flight Engineer Alexander Kaleri, who launched last month to replace the crew that Lucid has worked with for most of her stay on Mir. He is scheduled to be picked up on *Atlantis*’ return mission, STS-81, carrying Jerry Linenger to the station in January.

While looking forward to a trip he first dreamed of five years ago, Blaha doesn’t know as yet what will follow this next mission. He said he has learned from Norman Thagard, the first American to stay on Mir, and several cosmonauts who have had Mir flights, that long-duration missions become a “psychological battle.”

Blaha said the U.S. space program needs to stay in orbit “to get a handle on what it is really like to stay in space that long. It’s an area that I don’t think we have much experience in in our space program, so I think we need to understand that.”

After four shuttle flights, Blaha is ready to do something a little different. “There’s no better way to contribute to the International Space Station than to first really understand what it’s like to be on that type of a mission,” he said.

STS-29, STS-33, STS-43 and STS-58 combined add up to about a month in space. Now Blaha will stay in space for a duration at least three and a half times that.

“Every shuttle flight I’ve flown, I’ve never wanted to come home on entry day. I really enjoyed being in orbit. I’ve always said I would stay there forever. I think that on this mission I will define what ‘ever’ is.” □

